Between trust and distrust in research with participants in conflict context

Celestina, M

Original citation & hyperlink:
Celestina, M 2018, 'Between trust and distrust in research with participants in conflict context' *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, vol 21, no. 3, pp. 373-383
https://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13645579.2018.1427603

DOI 10.1080/13645579.2018.1427603
ISSN 1364-5579
ESSN 1464-5300

Publisher: Taylor and Francis

This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in International Journal of Social Research Methodology on 19/01/2018, available online: http://www.tandfonline.com/10.1080/13645579.2018.1427603

Between trust and distrust in research with participants in conflict context

Mateja Celestina

Centre for Trust Peace and Social Relations, Coventry University

This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in International Journal of Social Research Methodology on 19/012018, available online: http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13645579.2018.1427603

Between trust and distrust in research with participants in conflict context

Trust is often treated as a binary where research participants either trust researchers or not, whereas in reality trust is multi-layered. Drawing on 10 months of fieldwork working with internally displaced persons and their non-displaced neighbours in rural Colombia, this article provides a more nuanced discussion of trust in research. It identifies ways in which participants are vulnerable, provides fieldwork strategies to address these vulnerabilities, and questions the assumption that extended time spent in the field necessarily results in greater trust. It argues that such beliefs underestimate the complexity of conflict and post-conflict research contexts where political and social relations are often unstable. Demonstrating that trust may be compartmentalised, and that trust and distrust can coexist, it proposes that the question researchers should ask themselves is not whether participants trust us or not but rather in what capacity and to what degree they (dis)trust us and what influences their level of trust.

Keywords: trust; vulnerability; qualitative research; conflict; fieldwork; internal displacement

Don Eduardo, who was displaced from the department of Tolima in Colombia, spoke of the injustices that internally displaced persons (IDPs) suffer.[1] In his narrative he took emotional distance from the process; he spoke from his position as an IDP leader defending the rights of the displaced. He recounted the difficulties of accessing assistance, elaborated on the breach of IDPs' rights, and emphasised the loss of land and

possessions; suggesting that displacement amounted to a 'loss of stability'. He too had lost land - he had had three *fincas* (farms) in Tolima, he asserted. His daughter Juanita, who like her father is an IDP leader, echoed his sentiments. However, when she spoke of her father's suffering and loss, she mentioned he had had two, not three *fincas*. Don Eduardo's wife, Doña María, who unlike her husband retold their story without emotional reservations – her voice and statements conveyed anger, sadness and at times despair – recounted they had lost one *finca* only, not two or three. It was 'a beautiful one. It gave us all we needed', she added with a hint of nostalgia.

Inconsistencies, such as the above example of different amounts of land that people lost, silences, reservations, but also great openness mark the variety of responses I came across during my research on displacement experiences in rural Colombia. I accessed my participants through a gatekeeper, and spent ten months in the field; nevertheless the rapport I managed to establish with people differed. Was I doing something wrong? Why did I not manage to reach a higher degree of trust; greater openness and preparedness to share experiences, feelings, beliefs and opinions? What was standing in the way of trust formation? Did those who told me half-truths (Fujii, 2010) not trust me? Is it feasible to establish 'complete' trust in conflict and post-conflict environments, or in any research environment for that matter? These are some of the questions with which this article engages.

I conducted fieldwork in two parts, seven months in 2011 and three months in 2012 which were divided between Porvenir and Esperanza, two villages in the department of Cundinamarca, and the capital, Bogotá. I worked both with internally displaced persons and their non-displaced neighbours. I lived with and worked alongside my participants and gathered the information through ethnographic interviews and participant observation. The two villages are relatively stable areas where, save for two incidents, I

did not experience any direct threat to my personal safety or that of my participants. Nevertheless, people were aware of their vulnerabilities and 'on guard' because of the ongoing conflict in other parts of the country, their past experiences of violence and displacement, occasional threats and extortions, the increased military presence during the time of local elections, and local factionalism.

Academics almost unanimously agree that trust forms an important aspect of the research process and is indispensable in research with conflict-affected and other marginalized populations (Bosk, 2004; Hynes, 2003; Lammers, 2007). Nevertheless, there has been relatively little in-depth analysis of trust in research and few seem to have written openly about the difficulties they encountered in securing trust (a notable exception being Chakravarty, 2012). Additionally, trust is too often treated as a binary; namely, that trust has either been generated or not (Wood, 2006). In this article I discuss various dimensions of participants' vulnerabilities which influence the level of trust. I demonstrate that trust is complex and dynamic, that it exists to different degrees and that people can trust and distrust at the same time. The article reminds readers that human relationships are not simple, that fieldwork processes are not perfect and involve challenges but that this does not mean that they are 'fatally flawed' (Magolda, 2000a, p. 210).

The article consists of four parts. The first part discusses the specific challenges that conflict and post-conflict environments have for the generation of trust. Considering that trust entails elements of risk and vulnerability, I identify the different dimensions in which participants were vulnerable and explain what was at stake had they misplaced their trust. Their vulnerabilities extended from the risk of loss of life, getting emotionally upset, exacerbation of community relations, to the potential influence on assistance flows. The second part explores the factors which influenced people's perceptions of their

vulnerability, such as the extent to which we managed to establish trust based on common identification. It also presents some of the fieldwork strategies I employed to address people's vulnerabilities. These were respect for confidentiality, gradual approach to asking sensitive questions, representation of data, and attempts at neutrality, which had its own ramifications on trust. In the third section I draw attention to the dynamic and compartmentalised nature of trust. I challenge the oversimplified presentations which hint at correlation between time spent in the field and generation of trust (see also Magolda, 2000b) to stress that while trust and rapport can grow with time they should not be taken for granted. There are events often outside of researcher's control which impact trust dynamics. The section also shows that trust is not a binary; trust is compartmentalised and can co-exist with distrust. The final, fourth part concludes. It argues that questions which ask whether participants trust the researcher or not and statements that trust is necessary for good research insufficiently capture the dynamic and complex nature of trust in conflict and post-conflict or any other research context.

Trust, conflict and vulnerability

The concept of trust does not relate solely to isolated individuals and their psychological states, but is a property of collective units and affects relationships between people (Lewis & Weigert, 1985, p. 968). Trust is therefore relational. It depends on our relationships either directly through interaction, that is our actions can influence how trustworthy we seem to be, or indirectly through other people and reputational effects (Hardin, 2002, p. 3); that is, how trustworthy we come across depends on the information that other people give about us. There are three elements implicit in a number of trust definitions (Lewicki, 2006, p. 94) which influence the level and nature of trust. First, a person's trust of another depends on their predisposition to trust. Predisposition to trust is partly influenced by

early learning and involves extensive investment by others, such as parents (Hardin, 1992, p. 515). It is influenced by people's biographies; therefore living in conflict for an extended periods of one's life and following the unwritten 'rules' which help you survive, such as the rule of silence discussed below, is likely to result in lower pre-dispositions to trust. The second one concerns the history of the relationship. In other words, if our relationship has been characterised by a respect for trust, I am more likely to trust you, compared to histories where trust has been breached. The third one relates to situational parameters, such as the given context within which the relationship or interaction unfolds and which are often outside researcher's control. This could be for instance sustained periods of violence or the particularities of a pre-election period. Situational parameters play an essential role in trust generation process, especially in highly sensitive contexts, such as conflict or post-conflict environment.

Conflict and post-conflict settings present some of the most complex and challenging research contexts. The elevated levels of misunderstandings, the unsettled grievances, and the presence of or remains of armed groups can generate an atmosphere of mistrust and suspicion among the population as a whole (N. Cohen & Arieli, 2014, pp. 424-425). In conflict societies distrust permeates social relationships at the micro level, including within families, and substantially affects the social fabric (Green, 1995). This is also true for Colombia. Generations have gone by without experiencing peace in the whole of the country's territory. Decades long conflict has generated a number of diverse armed groups the support for which can sometimes vary on the family level (Pécaut, 1999). That is, members of the same family can support different groups. In such a 'state of ambiguity' the meaning of a 'friend' or 'neighbour' has lost the usual connotations of cognitive proximity (Castillejo Cuéllar, 2000, p. 264). They became more like strangers, whose actions are difficult to predict, which has repercussions on trust.

Due to the negative effects conflict has had on social trust, a number of people practice *la ley del silencio* or the 'rule of silence'. Like in some other conflicts (Goodhand, 2000; Green, 1995) silence is an instrument of repression in Colombia. Silence imposed through terror keeps people in check. But silence is also used as a means of survival. As some participants explain, if they see a crime, they look away or if they hear something, they do not say a word. In a context where faith in the police is meagre, impunity levels are high, where some believe that *chismes* (gossip) can kill you, where there is lack of protection mechanisms which would prevent armed groups and members of criminal gangs from seeking retaliation, many find social silence the best survival strategy.

Conducting research in such circumstances provides specific challenges. Due to 'pain, shame, embarrassment, or fear' certain topics fall within the category of '*undiscussables*, let alone *unmentionables*' (Zerubavel, 2010, emphasis in the original). Participants in conflict and post-conflict environments are fearful, guarded and can deliberately distort information (Chakravarty, 2012. p. 252). Carolyn Nordstrom warns that '[e]veryone has a story, complete with vested interests, and all the stories collide into contentious assemblages of partial truths, political fictions, personal foibles, military propaganda, and cultural lore' (Nordstrom, 1995. p. 139). Ultimately, people may mistrust the motives behind research (Mackenzie, McDowell, & Pittaway, 2007). They may, for instance, be led by general fear that the researcher is an informant, base their distrust on previous experience in similar situations, or distrust that research will bring about any kind of positive change.

Trust entails elements of vulnerability (Bigley & Pearce, 1998; Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995) and risk (Hardin, 1992; Luhmann, 2000; Mayer et al., 1995). It concerns the 'willingness of a party to be vulnerable to the actions of another party' (Mayer et al., 1995, p. 712). That is why conflict and post-conflict environments are so

particular. Involvement in research generates different degrees of vulnerabilities some of which are unique to politically sensitive contexts while others are also present in other research situations. In order to better understand what is at stake and what may stand in the way of trust, we need to unpack these vulnerabilities. Such unpacking helps us guide our actions while in the field, it helps us interpret and analyse the data that we gather, or indeed do not gather.

My participants were vulnerable in a number of ways, and to different degrees. They were vulnerable in diverse, sometimes overlapping dimensions – in physical, emotional, social, and partly also economic dimension. Physical dimension refers to physical consequences of participation. This could be curtailment of personal freedom and imprisonment if participants had entrusted me with information which I later by choice or following legal requirements reported to the police. They could be vulnerable to criminalisation by the state if their potential involvement in the coca cultivation, their potential support to the guerrilla groups, by choice or force, or their attempts to pass themselves off as IDPs became known. But participants' willingness to take the risk and make themselves vulnerable could also be fatal. Had they misplaced their trust they might be in danger of retaliation from respective armed actors. In Porvenir, those displaced by the different armed groups have been resettled together. In the first couple of years after resettlement when the emotions were heated and resentment was still rife, disagreements among people resulted in two deaths. While the situation has calmed down, political disparities are still present.

Besides physical vulnerability, participants may be vulnerable emotionally. Discussions about violence and oppression may unwillingly and sometimes unexpectedly bring back painful memories which may last for days or weeks after the interview. While researchers may be present only for a short time, their questions 'may reverberate for a

long time afterwards' (Goodhand, 2000: 13). Some participants wish to speak about experiences of conflict as a means of a healing process. Alejandra, a displaced woman in her thirties who left Urabá, her area of origin, when she was still a teenager, said to me she 'had to speak'. She would not speak for years after physical relocation, but this changed. The change was in part generated as a result of her participation in workshops for 'displaced and vulnerable women', where the psychologist running the workshops encouraged women to share their stories. Being able to share her experiences, Alejandra said, showed that she was 'strong' and it helped her to move on. There are, however, also others who prefer not to think of the violent past or present. Doña Flor, a displaced woman in her late fifties, said her 'heart still jumps' when someone mentions the paramilitaries. Even though she is physically away from conflict, the past is still very much present. Through agreeing to take part in research, participants place themselves at risk of having their 'strength' tested and can get emotionally upset also when researchers pose no questions related directly to experiences of violence.

Involvement in research may leave an impact on participants' emotional stability. On the one hand, participants may be vulnerable to having their morals questioned. For instance, if they trust the researcher that they were involved in illegal or deviant activities, participants put themselves at risk of being morally judged. On the other hand, emotional stability is at risk when research involves people who know each other. There is a risk that other participants might reveal potentially damaging information about one, which may involuntarily affect one's relationship with the researcher. People's reputations and information we get about them can lead us 'to approach the relationship attuned to trust or to suspicion' (J. Cohen, 2000, p. 99). When some of the displaced in Esperanza complained about the dishonest practices that the IDP leaders were at times involved in, I found myself questioning their trustworthiness more than that of the other participants.

The relationship became not only about whether they trusted me, but also about the level to which I trusted them. More specifically, while I might have trusted the IDP leaders on certain general topics I was more doubtful and cautious with some other data they have provided, especially in relation to topics which were the point of disagreement between the leaders and other displaced persons.

A similar kind of vulnerability experience those participants, whose participation in research could make them vulnerable to stigma. These might be for instance survivors of sexual violence or the displaced, especially if their displacement status is not known. If the focus of research is narrow, and includes only the specified category of people, participants risk being associated with that group which could in certain cases bring on or deepen their stigma. Participants are additionally at a risk of being stigmatised if a secret part of their lives is revealed (Brannen, 1988; Dickson-Swift, Lyn James, & Liamputtong, 2008).

Closely related to the impact on emotional stability is the social dimension of vulnerability. Like trust, vulnerability is relational. Relational vulnerability refers to different webs of relationships. One such is the already mentioned relationship between the researcher and the participant. Another prominent web of relationships is that which exists among the participants, and between participants and other people on the ground who might not take part in the research. Researcher's presence can make people more vulnerable in their relations. Some of my participants openly expressed their concern about their information being leaked to others in the village. When I first entered Doña Flor's house and I explained I was conducting research on internal displacement and that I wished to speak with her about this issue, her eyes narrowed slightly and perhaps without really expecting an answer, she asked how she could know that I would keep my promise and not tell others what we had discussed. Doña Flor, a strong woman who

spends her days looking after the house and attends to a handful of workers who work on her and her husband's well-kept coffee farm, leaves little to chance. She agreed to take part but was initially extremely cautious and very carefully chose what information she shared. She knew the relationships in the village were anything but harmonious and did not want to risk disturbing them more. If I had breached participants' trust by sharing their stories, social relationships in the two villages and potentially also within families could have deteriorated. Additionally, if people are seen to trust the researcher with important information, this may result in mistrust from within the community. Community members might stop sharing their opinions, histories and feelings, fearing they might be leaked to the researcher.

Finally, there is also an economic dimension to vulnerability. In contexts where there is presence of humanitarian or development aid, research findings can potentially influence the flow of assistance. Alternatively, research participants might believe the researchers can affect its distribution, even if this is not the case, and thus perceive themselves as vulnerable. The latter is particularly true when our gatekeeper is a non-governmental organisation (NGO) working in the area, and when participants rightly or mistakenly believe the researcher's involvement with the NGO extends beyond the introduction to the research site. Two non-displaced people asked me directly about my conclusions on who lived in worse conditions, themselves or the displaced. The non-displaced in the two villages are the so called historically poor, some without land or their own house, who even though they have not been displaced struggle to make a living. Nevertheless, they do not receive as much attention in governmental policies as the displaced. The non-displaced might have posed the question only to receive a confirmation of their own believes; but they might have also posed it thinking I would share these kinds of observations with the NGO through which I entered the two villages.

Through opening up their homes, research participants are making themselves vulnerable to comparative conclusions on greater suffering, which could potentially have consequences on the assistance they receive.

Addressing vulnerabilities

People have different perceptions of risk and these perceptions are highly subjective (Dickson-Swift et al., 2008, p. 5). What one person might consider vulnerability, someone else might not. My perception of people's vulnerabilities also very likely differed from participants' own impressions. One of the factors which influenced the level of perceived vulnerabilities and consequently the degree of trust that was generated was the extent to which we managed to establish common identification. 'Identification-based trust' is a stronger type of trust, which is based on empathy, understanding of one's stance, and shared values (Lewicki & Bunker, 1996). When such an identification is present, both parties to trust 'can be confident that their interests are fully protected, and that no ongoing surveillance or monitoring of one another is necessary' (Lewicki, 2006, p. 96). In other words, people evaluate that the risk of their trust being misplaced is low.

Identification, considering that people have multiple identities (Ahmed, 2016), is situational rather than fixed. It can be based on a number of criteria, age, gender, ethnicity, religious affiliations, and political beliefs amongst others, which also intersect (Enguix, 2014). My gender and age – I was in my thirties, of similar age as some of the women I interviewed, and like them also of rural background, helped me access certain items of information a male researcher might have not been able to. Because of the nature of the work in the countryside, I accompanied women in their daily chores to a greater extent than men, which created more opportunities to share. Some women, particularly the non-displaced, told me stories of present and past family violence, their respective husbands'

infidelity, or problems with alcohol. They likely assessed the risk of misplacing their trust, that I would for instance share their stories with their husbands, as lower.

Another important basis in the search of common identification, particularly with some of the displaced, was my assumed political affiliations. The latter greatly influenced the information participants shared or did not share with me. Due to my attempts at neutrality, I never stated my political preferences openly, but these became visible through our discussions, my actions, and ultimately also the questions I asked (Morris, Woodward, & Peters, 1998). Tatiana, a displaced woman in her late forties said she trusted me because she could see I cared for what was going on and that I too was in favour of socialist ideas. As Peritore (1990, p. 366) argues, researchers who are sympathetic or at least open to concerns of the group in question, can gain 'emphatic appreciation'. Tatiana was an active member of Unión Patriótica (Patriotic Union) in the place of origin, a party on the political left, whose members were politically persecuted and many of whom have been killed. The fact that I originally came from a post-communist country, I felt, only helped in the process of identification. Tatiana's perception of the potential risk that I might abuse her trust, particularly in relation to what I termed above as physical vulnerability, was extremely low. She saw me as someone who understood her political engagements before her displacement, who did not judge her actions and as someone who would not use the information she trusted me with in a way which would harm her. This was to the extent that she trusted me with some politically very sensitive information, such as the names of her political colleagues that the paramilitaries were after, but who had managed to escape. I stopped her, told her I did not need to know that kind of information and made no attempt to memorise the names (and I did not) and I also did not record the information in any way. I possibly assessed her vulnerability as being higher than she had. Stopping Tatiana might have also

contributed to increased levels of trust. As Allen Feldman (1991: 12) points out, in order to learn it is necessary to show that there are places, things and people the researcher does not want to know about.

Alongside the effect of the similar affiliation and identification, there are a number of ways in which researchers can address participants' vulnerability, and generate greater trust. The most obvious one, which helps address some physical, emotional and social vulnerabilities, is confidentiality. Confidentiality 'implies that no one else will ever hear what the informant has said in a way that is attributable to him or her' (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1997, p. 143). Hammersley and Atkinson continue that under the agreement of confidentiality, participants may be more willing to convey their true opinions and perspectives. But they will only do so if they feel the confidentiality agreement has not been breached. In small research settings and in snowball sampling there is a risk that a participant is identified if the researcher repeats a piece of information he or she has learnt even if they do not name the participant (Jacobsen & Landau, 2003). It is quite easy to trace the author of the statement, or assume who they may be. If a participant told me a piece of information about another participant, I would not mention the information or pose related questions unless the concerned participant brought it up him/herself. If I had done so, I would have run the risk of influencing local relationships and I would jeopardise the trust I had gained not only with participants in question but generally speaking.

I also restrained myself from asking direct questions when it came to what are assumed to be sensitive topics in order to decrease people's emotional vulnerability. Sensitive research has the potential of posing a 'substantial threat to those who are or have been involved in it' (Lee, 1993, p. 4). The threat, Lee continues, comes predominately from three broad areas: as an intrusive threat dealing with private areas,

studies of deviancy which may stigmatise participants, and threats posed by research into political matters. My research encompassed all there. Despite its risks, research on sensitive topics is important, since shying away from it could be considered as evasion of responsibility (Dickson-Swift et al., 2008, p. 6). The question that remains is what strategies we can take to reduce people's vulnerability. I took a flexible approach to my research in the sense that I allowed the process to shape the research. I used the participants' stories to identify what they considered the most important issues, rather than having a fixed idea and framework. I allowed people to speak freely and would touch on what I thought could be sensitive issues only if they brought them up, or if I felt I could. Like Liisa Malkki (1995) I too 'demonstrated my trustworthiness by not prying where I was not wanted'. Julia Brannen (1988, p. 553) similarly supports the idea of '[a]llowing the research topic to emerge gradually in its own terms', as the best methodological approach in sensitive research. Yet, it is also important to note that researchers cannot know how and if the participants will be affected (Dickson-Swift et al., 2008: 9). Participants' response and reaction is often impossible to predict, a lesson I also learnt despite treating my participants with caution.

Another strategy of reducing people's vulnerability, particularly economic but also emotional one, concerns the representation of data. Trust is not only about what people trust us with but also what they trust us to do when in the field but also after we leave it. Those that open up probably trust we are going to present them in a good light. While it is not often discussed, people care about how they are written about (Ellis, 2007). Or they at least trust that we will present them in a way that does not harm them, for instance, as stated above, by influencing the flow of assistance in a negative manner. What is at stake are individuals as well as the collective interests of respondents (Brannen, 1988: 561). The understanding and appreciation of the given context is essential when

representing data. This includes the analysis of deviant behaviour where participants run a risk of moral judgement, or when we identify a lie. Contextualisation of the discrepancies in the amount of land Don Eduardo lost, which I presented in the introduction to this article, gives a possible explanation to the half-truths he and his daughter told me. The reparations that people receive hardly ever if ever reach the assets they have lost. Through claiming they have lost more than they actually have, the displaced are attempting to increase their chances of fairer reparations. The failure to put such instances in context risks affecting the relationship between the researcher and the participant, since the researcher might simply label the participant as a liar, and moral judgements may have consequences on participants' self-image.

Lastly, in order to address predominately social vulnerability, I attempted to maintain 'neutrality'. I put neutrality in inverted commas since we as researchers always bring our own 'cultural identities, perceptions and preoccupations' in the research process (Morris et al., 1998, p. 218); hence the extent to which we are neutral is open to discussion. The degree to which my attempts were successful is questionable as my decision affected the information I collected. A number of scholars agree that letting political sympathies be known is a precondition for a trusting relationship when working with conflict affected populations (Mackenzie et al., 2007). Examples from Mexico (J. Cohen, 2000), South Africa (Dawes, Tredoux, & Feinstein, 1989) and Guatemala (Miller, 2004) confirm this. Those who suffered injustices need to know that we as researchers condemn those injustices, and this often entails taking sides. I took sides in the sense that I agreed with the non-displaced that more should be done to address their situation (albeit not at the expense of the displaced); I took sides with the displaced in the sense that I showed disapproval of their displacement regardless the armed group responsible for it and of the state's response. What I did not do, though, is take sides in local disparities. I

was working with displaced persons, who were displaced by different armed actors, as well as with the non-displaced. Disagreements existed between the displaced and the non-displaced, as well as among the displaced, and I could not afford to indicate an open support for anyone. Despite my 'neutrality' some people, without expressing this, associated me with certain participants (see also J. Cohen, 2015), either with the people I was staying with for longer periods of time, or with those with whom I felt greater connection and identification. Taking sides and speaking only to a group of the displaced would have probably yielded different information, possibly richer, and reduced the potential fear that I would share any information with those outside the 'group'. However, social relations within the hamlet were one of my research interests, hence limiting myself to one group was not an option. Demonstrating my attempts at neutrality, while at the same time acknowledging the injustices participants have been suffering seemed the best approach to address the social dimension of vulnerability in the given situation. In some others, declarations of open sympathies might be a better option.

All these strategies were assisted by the extended time I spent in the field. Prolonged fieldwork enabled me to identify participants' vulnerabilities and appreciate their extent. It also allowed people to evaluate and re-evaluate their vulnerabilities as the fieldwork progressed. It, however, in itself was not enough to generate trust. Rather, it permitted me to observe the non-linear nature of trust. In the continuation I discuss the dynamic but also compartmentalised nature of trust. Such appreciation helps show that participants' perceptions of their vulnerabilities are not fixed but can change together with the circumstances. It also helps demonstrate that trust once gained is not necessarily there to stay, but also that trust consists at various levels.

Dynamic and compartmentalised nature of trust

Literature often present trust in an uncritical framework, suggesting that the longer time spent in the field, the more rapport and trust researchers are able to build (Mazurana, Jacobsen, & Andrews Gale, 2013; Miller, 2004). Time and the history of a relationship influence the negotiation of trust, but the relation between time and trust generation is not as simple as sometimes portrayed. Long-term fieldwork does not necessarily result in a high level of trust. Maurice Punch (1979, p.13), while he established good rapport with his research participants, patrolmen in Amsterdam police, was surprised to discover that they were hiding a number of things from him. After his fieldwork had ended he joined his participants at a celebration where he writes that he in one night learnt more about the police than during his six-month fieldwork. In a similar research context, John Van Maanen also reflects that he 'was purposefully led astray by certain patrolmen time and time again' (Van Maanen, 1981, p. 213), even though he spent several months in the field.

Trust is dynamic, fluid and situational. Trust and rapport can change and sometimes with little warning (J. Cohen, 2015, p.14). In my research I experienced such change. I felt I gained substantial amount of trust during my first trip. People spoke about their experiences to me, and that was also the aim of my fieldwork. But similarly to Punch (1979) mentioned above, I realised that I had not established trust to the degree I had thought I had. Upon my return to the two villages, a number of people opened up more than during my first stay. Alongside them were those who did not, as well as those whose trust somehow retroceded. Linda and Carols, a couple in their forties, were one such example. They left Tolima, their area of origin, due to guerrilla's presence and activity. During my first stay in the village Carlos told me he had spent some time in Los Llanos working in coca cultivation with his brother-in-law. When I asked him about it during my return to the hamlet both Carlos and Linda denied having such history. One of the

potential explanations for their change could be the change in security situation. The number of extortions and related casualties increased between my first and second visit to Porvenir and Linda and Carlos might have reassessed their trust and vulnerability as a result of this change. Namely, alterations of political climate can bring about a re-evaluation of one's trustworthiness (Mayer et al., 1995, p.727).

Another possible reason for the change was the fact that I decided to continue staying in Don Eduardo and Doña María's house upon my return to Porvenir, even though Linda and Carlos had invited me to stay with them. My decision not to, did not contribute to a greater development of trust with Linda and Carlos. The two families did not get on well, largely due to different political views. Whenever I visited Linda and Carlos, Doña María showed her disapproval. On the other hand, when I was with Linda and Carlos I had to emphasise that I was not supporting any of the political parties – such assurances were particularly necessary in the period during the local elections in which Don Eduardo was a candidate for one of the seats in the local council. In cases like this I could feel the impact of my attempts at neutrality and the decision to not take sides in local disagreements. Jeffrey Cohen (2000, 2015) in his fieldwork in Mexico experienced similar change in relationships. The local elections undermined the trust he and his wife had managed to gain during months previous to elections. Due to the shifting political power and since they were caught in the middle, they felt alienated from the community.

In politically sensitive contexts being seen or associated with the 'wrong' person can inhibit progression of the trust-relationship or take you a step back in what has already been achieved. Burt and Knez (1996, p.83) write that 'trust builds incrementally', but that 'distrust has a more catastrophic quality', in other words, that it develops a lot quicker. It might be difficult to imagine such 'catastrophic quality' in strong relationships, for instance within a family; however in temporarily formed relationships between researcher

and his/her participants a quick change is more likely. This is particularly the case when a new vulnerability is detected or experienced anew, even if at some other levels trust continues. Trust, after all, is not an all or nothing matter.

In many respects, trust in relation to research shares similarities to trust in non-research contexts. If we reflect on everyday relationships we have with our friends, family members, and colleagues, what becomes clear is that relationships are multi-layered. We might be happy to trust a colleague the difficulties we are experiencing at work, but may not be so happy to share aspects of our personal life and vice versa. With those people with whom we have a regular contact, we develop a 'thick trust' relationship. We know them 'well enough to know the limits of their trustworthiness' (Hardin, 1992, p. 510). But most often than not, we reveal and in turn get to know only certain aspects of people's lives in both our personal and professional lives; segmented relationships are the rule rather than an exception (Lewicki & McAllister, 1998, p.444).

Relationships that are born out of research are in many respects similar; we are likely to form a very tight-knit trust relationship with certain individuals, but the number of these tends to be small. The large majority will likely be people who might be comfortable speaking about certain aspects of their experiences but not others. They might be happy to narrate objective facts, which others may confirm, such as for instance, who were the actors responsible for displacement. But they might not be so willing to share their opinions or parts of their stories. Trust in such cases, Lewicki and McAllister write, is 'compartmentalized', in other words, this means that 'relationship partners might trust each other in certain aspects, not trust each other in other aspects, and even distrust each other at times' (1998, p. 450). Returning to the initial discussion on the dimensions of vulnerability, this means that participants' perception of their emotional vulnerability might be low but they assess their physical vulnerability as high. As such they might

describe aspects of their experiences of displacement but leave out information on their potential sympathies or support given to any of the armed groups. Trust and distrust can thus coexist.

Conclusion

Research with people necessarily involves social relationships. Researchers engage in the conversation with research participants, who ultimately have the power to decide what kind of information – if any – they share with us, the detail they include, or they can mould a story in a way to produce a certain kind of narrative. The researcher, on the other end of the relationship, is the one who decides what to do with the information, who to share it with and how to present the participants. Hence, it comes as no surprise that it is commonly agreed that the establishment of trust is of significant assistance or even crucial for good research. Yet, establishment of trust is not a linear and straight-forward process, particularly not in complex conflict and post-conflict research contexts which are fraught with political, social and also economic instabilities.

It is necessary to have a more nuanced discussion on trust, which calls for a change in methodological focus. The intricate and dynamic nature of trust makes the question of whether we established trust with research participants or not seem inappropriate. It also makes the assertions that trust is necessary in research somewhat insufficient, since the statement fails to capture the complexity of human relationships, of research process and of trust itself. It seems more sensible to ask at what level participants trust us, in what capacity and circumstances they (dis)trust us, and what the trust-negotiation process has been influenced by. Such an approach calls for the identification and understanding of the dimensions in which participants are potentially vulnerable. It encourages us to place greater attention to the situation, and to our conduct and position in the research context.

What we ask, how we act, and how we present the information can have consequences for participants individually, on the group level, as well as for community relationships. Awareness of different dimensions of vulnerabilities also helps explain a potential sudden change in the nature of trust. Crucially, the appreciation of people's vulnerabilities invites us to devise ways to address them to the extent this is possible. Researchers cannot control everything and many outcomes of research lie beyond our scope (J. Cohen, 2000, p. 321). Nevertheless, thinking about potential challenges can help us tackle these more efficiently (Bell, 2013, p. 121); it can thus positively contribute to a more trusting relationship.

[1] I have changed participants' and some place names in order to protect their anonymity.

References

Ahmed, S. (2016). Reflections on conducting research on the 'war on terror': religious identity, subjectivity and emotions *International Journal of Social Research Methodology, 19*(2), 177-190.

Bell, K. (2013). Doing qualitative fieldwork in Cuba: social research in politically sensitive locations. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology, 16*(2), 109-124.

Bigley, G. A., & Pearce, J. L. (1998). Straining for shared meaning in organization science: problems of trust and distrust. *Academy of Management Review, 23*(3), 405-421.

Bosk, C. (2004). The ethnographer and the IRB: comment on Kevin D. Haggerty , "Ethics creep: governing social science research in the name of ethics". *Qualitative Sociology, 27*(4), 417-420.

Brannen, J. (1988). Research note: The study of sensitive subjects. *The Sociological Review, 36*(3), 552-563.

Burt, R. S., & Knez, M. (1996). Trust and third-party gossip. In R. M. Kramer & T. R. Tyler (Eds.), *Trust in Organizations: Frontiers of Theory and Research* (pp. 68-89). Thousand Oaks: Sage.

Castillejo Cuéllar, A. (2000). *Poética de lo Otro, para una antropología de la guerra, la soledad y el éxilio interno en Colombia*. Bogotá: ICAN, Universidad Nacional de Colombia.

Chakravarty, A. (2012). 'Partially trusting' field relationships opportunities and constraints of fieldwork in Rwanda's postconflict setting. *Field Methods, 24*(3), 251-271.

Cohen, J. (2000). Problems in the field: participant observation and the assumption of neutrality. *Field Methods, 12*(4), 316-333.

Cohen, J. (2015). *Eating Soup without a Spoon. Anthropological Theory and Method in the Real World*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
Cohen, N., & Arieli, T. (2014). Field research in conflict environments: Methodological challenges and snowball sampling. *Journal of Peace Research, 48*(4), 423-435.
Dawes, A., Tredoux, C., & Feinstein, A. (1989). Political violence in South Africa: some effects on children of the violent destruction of their community. *International Journal of Mental Health, 18*(2), 16-43.
Dickson-Swift, V., Lyn James, E., & Liamputtong, P. (2008). *Undertaking Sensitive Research in the Health and Social Sciences. Managing Boundaries, Emotions and Risks*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Ellis, C. (2007). Telling secrets, revealing lives. Relational ethics in research with intimate others. *Qualitative Inquiry, 13*(1), 3-29.
Enguix, B. (2014). Negotiating the field: rethinking ethnographic authority, experience and the frontiers of research. *Qualitative Research, 4*(1), 79-94.
Fujii, L. A. (2010). Shades of truth and lies: Interpreting testimonies of war and violence. *Journal of Peace Research, 27*(2), 231-241.
Goodhand, J. (2000). Research in conflict zones: Ethics and accountability. *Forced Migration Review, 8*, 12-15.
Green, L. (1995). Living in a state of fear. In C. Nordstrom & A. C. G. M. Robben (Eds.), *Fieldwork under Fire. Contemporary Studies of Violence and Survival* (pp. 105-128). Berkeley: University of California Press.
Hammersley, M., & Atkinson, P. (1997). *Ethnography. Principles in Practice*. New York: Routledge.
Hardin, R. (1992). The street-level epistemology of trust. *Politics & Society, 21*(4), 505-529.
Hardin, R. (2002). *Trust and Trustworthiness*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.
Hynes, T. (2003). *The issue of 'trust' or 'mistrust' in research with refugees: choices, caveats and considerations for researchers. Working paper*. Geneva: UNHCR.
Jacobsen, K., & Landau, L. (2003). The dual imperative in refugee research: Some methodological and ethical considerations in social science research on forced migration. *Disasters, 27*(3), 186-206.
Lammers, E. (2007). Researching refugees: preoccupations with power and questions of giving. *Refugee Survey Quarterly, 26*(3), 72-81.
Lee, R. (1993). *Doing Research on Sensitive Topics*. London: Sage.
Lewicki, R. (2006). Trust, trust development, and trust repair. In M. Deutsch, P. Coleman, & E. Marcus (Eds.), *The Handbook of Conflict Resolution. Theory and Practice. Second Edition* (pp. 92-119). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
Lewicki, R., & Bunker, B. (1996). Developing and maintaining trust in work relationships. In R. M. Kramer & T. R. Tyler (Eds.), *Trust in Organizations. Frontiers of Theory and Research* (pp. 114-139). London: Sage.
Lewicki, R., & McAllister, R. (1998). Trust and distrust: new relationships and realities. *Academy of Management Review, 23*(3), 438-458.
Lewis, D., & Weigert, A. (1985). Trust as a social reality. *Social Forces, 63*(4), 967-985.
Luhmann, N. (2000). Familiarity, confidence, trust: Problems and alternatives. In D. Gambetta (Ed.), *Trust: Making and Breaking Cooperative Relations* (pp. 94-107). Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
Mackenzie, C., McDowell, C., & Pittaway, E. (2007). Beyond 'do no harm': the challenge of constructing ethical relationships in refugee research. *Journal of Refugee Studies, 20*(2), 299 - 319.

Magolda, P. M. (2000a). Accessing, waiting, plunging in, wondering, and writing: retrospective sense-making of fieldwork. *Field Methods, 12*(3), 209-234.
Magolda, P. M. (2000b). Being at the wrong place, wrong time: Rethinking trust in qualitative inquiry. *Theory Into Practice, 39*(3), 138-145.
Malkki, L. (1995). *Purity and Exile: Violence, Memory, and National Cosmology among Hutu Refugees in Tanzania*. Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press.
Mayer, R., Davis, J., & Schoorman, D. (1995). An integrative model of organizational trust. *The Academy of Management Review, 20*(3), 709-734.
Mazurana, D., Jacobsen, K., & Andrews Gale, L. (Eds.). (2013). *Research Methods in Conflict Settings. A View from Below*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
Miller, K. E. (2004). Beyond the frontstage: trust, access, and the relational context in research with refugee communities. *American Journal of Community Psychology, 33*(3/4), 217-227.
Morris, K., Woodward, D., & Peters, E. (1998). 'Whose side are you on?' Dilemmas in conducting feminist ethnographic research with young women. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology, 1*(3), 217-230.
Nordstrom, C. (1995). War on the front lines. In C. Nordstrom & A. C. G. M. Robben (Eds.), *Fieldwork Under Fire. Contemporary Studies of Violence and Survival* (Vol. 129-154). Berkeley: University of California Press.
Pécaut, D. (1999). From the banality of violence to real terror: the case of Colombia. In K. Koonings & D. Kruijt (Eds.), *Societies of fear: the legacy of civil war, violence and terror in Latin America*. London: Zed Books.
Peritore, P. (1990). Reflections on dangerous fieldwork. *The American Sociologist, 21*(4), 359-372.
Punch, M. (1979). *Policing the inner city. A study of Amsterdam's Warmoesstraat*. London: The Macmillan Press LTD.
Van Maanen, J. (1981). Notes on the production of ethnographic data in an American police agency. In R. Luckham (Ed.), *Law and Social Enquiry: Case Studies of Research* (pp. 189-230). Uppsala: Scandinavian Institute of African Studies.
Wood, E. J. (2006). The ethical challenges of field research in conflict zones. *Qual Sociol, 29*, 373-386.
Zerubavel, E. (2010). The social sound of silence: Toward a sociology of denial. In E. Ben-Ze'ev, R. Ginio, & J. Winter (Eds.), *Shadows of War. A Social History of Silence in the Twentieth Century* (pp. 32-46). Cambridge: Cambridge University Place.

Acknowledgements:

The author would like to thank Sarah Jenkins, Frens Kroeger and Mario Martínez for reading and commenting on earlier versions of this article and for sharing their ideas with me. I am also sincerely thankful to the three anonymous referees for their close reading of the article and invaluable suggestions on how to improve it.